

*Dubai: Gilded Cage*, by Syed Ali. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010. 240pp. \$20.00 paper. ISBN: 9780300152173.

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*Dubai: Gilded Cage* is a delightful read on a subject which is sometimes fun, especially when it dwells on the night-life, the sinfulness of a city, an oasis in a desert of piety—yet not all of it is fun and play. As if to compensate, some sections of the book cast a gloom, while dealing with the precarious existence of migrant workers or involuntary prostitution. Narrated in a language of jargon-free lucidity with quotes of the interlocutors, it is a book for social scientists whose eyes are tired of reading tables and for business travelers and general readers who will read it for pleasure and more for knowledge about Dubai. And they will get both.

The airport bookish tone becomes serious as Syed Ali pursues the story of a city that has been transformed from a “trading port” to a “global city” over the past few decades. Dubai has been a poster boy of superlatives, with its largest shopping mall, and the tallest tower, the city has had its share of international media attention—both positive and negative. The economic melt-down—which was caused by a multiplicity of factors, not the least of which was the consequence of the financial crisis that began in the United States—dampened but did not extinguish the spirit of Dubai. The crisis was global and was tackled in the same global manner.

The rise of Dubai in the early days can be accounted for by the colonial phase of globalization, its geographical location and the connectivity it provided. Ali’s narratives highlight, correctly, Dubai’s growing prominence not only as a port linking various key regions of the world but due to the policies in India and Pakistan. While India and Pakistan maintained strict restrictions on the flow of gold, Dubai pursued a policy of *laissez-faire*, attracting merchants who bought gold legally in Dubai, then transported and sold to the gold hungry Indo-Pakistan subcontinent illicitly at a prime price.

Even before the gold rush, Dubai had a history of an open port in the nineteenth century

gaining prominence after the decline of a rival port in Iran in 1902 (Kazim 2010). Ali does not go that far in history but focuses on more recent developments of Dubai, tracing its rise from the mid-twentieth century. Ali’s discussion of the political economy of the rise of Dubai is insightful yet when it comes to causal priority, he tends to lean heavily on the public policies, especially in regard to residence and citizenship. Expatriates make up 90 percent of Dubai’s population who live in a state of “permanent impermanence” (p. ix). It is this precariousness of the migrants that propelled the author, himself a second-generation American, to write the book. The author compares house rents in Dubai with his own mortgage in Brooklyn, and mentions a white American roommate who never spoke to him. Such first person narratives make the book immensely readable and help the author to proceed beyond the political economy and public policy into the everyday life of Dubai society.

As the author expounds the migrant and employment policies, including affirmative action policies to hire more locals, he is forced to move beyond Dubai into the larger scope of the United Arab Emirates, the nation-state made up of seven emirates: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Ras al-Khaimah, Umm al-Quwain and Fujairah.

This poses a problem of unit of analysis. It is difficult to limit the discussion to the city while dwelling on public policies which are made at the federal level. However, the difficulty of the author lies in the arrangement of confederation and the relationships among the federal units. While discussing Sovereign Wealth Funds, he is forced to move into Abu Dhabi which is home to some of the larger SWFs (p. 50). This does not, however, handicap the author in his analysis of Dubai and its expatriate population who built the city. However, Dubai is a global city with a difference, it “is a transitional social space” (p. 10). For high-end expatriates, it is also a “springboard for migrating to the West” (p. 10). The author deals with the trade-off between political freedom and economic freedom, and Dubai offers plenty of the latter. This trade-off is not limited to the residents of Dubai, it is the fate of (and even, choice of) many in the rich countries of Southeast and East Asia. The logic of *laissez-faire* attracts

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all sorts of people to Dubai, including gangsters and prostitutes.

The darker side of globalization is well illuminated in the book. Thanks to the rulers of Dubai who wanted to diversify (or were forced to because, unlike Abu Dhabi, oil revenue's contribution to the GDP of Dubai is miniscule) the city has become a major tourist attraction for nearly 7 million visitors (more than the total population of the country). The tourism industry in Dubai—not unlike other Asian tourist destinations—is built on “shopping and hedonism” (p. 43). The author dwells on the transition of culture which is “plastic” (p. 68) to culture befitting a global city—art galleries and international film festivals. But art thrives on freedom, which poses a challenge in Dubai with its censorship and more importantly, self-censorship. The latter is a feature of societies dominated by expatriates. The author goes on to discuss how Dubai and the UAE in general are emphasizing higher education, attracting scores of international universities to set up their branches. Dubai has about 40 such universities (p. 76).

Ali dwells at length on the working class, who in his words are “socially invisible, interchangeable and ultimately disposable” (p. 81). The impermanence and exploitation of the workers, their living conditions, in short their precarious existence make up an important part of the book. The construction workers, house maids, and camel jockeys (although the latter have now been replaced by remote controlled robots) are the faces of “factors of production” who keep the city going. He summarizes the litany of criticisms to which Dubai and UAE have been subjected over the years. But to be even-handed, Ali also records the shifts in policies with regard to migrant workers mainly in response to the criticisms of the Human Rights groups. While the author leans on secondary materials in his discussion of the plight of the workers, his discussion on the dilemma between freedom and development, the complexity of the issues of citizenship rights, the relationship between citizens and expatriates, the hedonistic life-style of the British expatriates is supported by the rich interviews that he conducts. The book ends with Weberian and,

to some extent, Marxist pessimism (though these names are unstated) which is the condition of “disenfranchised” humanity in a society of hyper-consumption and crass-materialism.

### Reference

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*Orderly Fashion: A Sociology of Markets*, by Patrik Aspers. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010. 237pp. \$35.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780691141572.

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Fashion has been a topic of sociological inquiry for quite some time, having captured the attention of several central figures of the discipline. But as a social process, fashion evolves not only in content but also in form, with new patterns of production, distribution and consumption emerging over time and throughout space. As such, analyses such as those offered by Patrik Aspers in *Orderly Fashion* are welcome and timely contributions to the literature.

In *Orderly Fashion*, Aspers provides a thorough evaluation of a widespread facet of contemporary fashion, namely, the branded garment retail industry (comprised of such household names as Gap, Zara and H&M). Addressing the most accessible form of fashion in prevalence today, Aspers' book is designed as a two-fold contribution. At one level, the analysis of fashion is an opportunity to discuss the origins of order within and without markets, a topic Aspers deems relatively undertheorized yet central to the sociological endeavor. At a different level, his study is a site for developing, refining and introducing novel conceptual tools for